

‘Women’s Tales’: Postfeminist Adventures into Consumerville

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This article examines the project ‘Women’s Tales’, an on-going series of short films that fashion designer Miuccia Prada commissioned from international female directors, among them Lucrecia Martel, Ava DuVernay and Agnès Varda. By situating this endeavour in relation to female agency, authorial expressivity, and consumerism, it is argued that the project conforms to postfeminist media culture for its celebration of feminine bonds, make-over strategies and the use of luxury as a tool for pleasure and empowerment. As a series of fashion films at the interstices of different systems: advertisement and art, film and online media, experimental and mainstream practices, ‘Women’s Tales’ occasionally contain some critical potential, but struggle to challenge existing fashion paradigms. This article questions the postfeminist ethos that the project espouses, claiming that through its in-between, interstitial status, ‘Women’s Tales’ destabilise representational conventions without really disrupting fashions’ foundation.

Postfeminism, fashion films, luxury, interstitial, Prada.

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1. Introduction

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the development of innovative synergies between the fashion industry and digital media with the emergence of the fashion film, a spurious notion which groups diverse types of audiovisual materials creatively promoting a brand. Due to the consolidations of platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, and the changes in fashion advertising and consumption, luxury corporations have started employing short films as a form of branding and communication. Paloma Díaz Soloaga and Leticia García Guerrero argue that in recent years new and unconventional communications strategies have taken over the more traditional advertising campaigns in television, magazines and billboards since fashion companies aim to relate with their customers, and express their brand identity in different ways.¹

The Prada group has been at the forefront of challenging the norms of traditional advertising techniques and moving fashion shoots, considering film as an art form and embracing the creative use of video through collaborations with renowned filmmakers. At the 2012 Cannes Film Festival, Roman Polanski presented his short fashion film, *A Therapy*, starring Sir Ben Kingsley and Helena Bonham Carter after the screening of his restored *Tess* (1979), and playfully called it “an anti-ad”.² A year later, Prada collaborated with filmmaker Wes Anderson: first for a more traditional advertisement for the perfume Candy, and then for a short fashion film, *Castello Cavalcanti* (2013).³ It is however the project ‘Women’s Tales’, sponsored by the smaller subsidiary of the fashion house: Miu Miu, which has attracted most critical acclaim and scholarly attention.

Started in 2012 and still ongoing, ‘Women’s Tales’ is a hybrid project featuring twelve stylistically diverse short films, all focused on women, shot and written by female filmmakers from various backgrounds. In this article, I will first contextualise the project at the juncture between the company’s patronage endeavours and the widespread phenomenon of digital fashion films, a debated notion to which I will return. Secondly, by situating this branding strategy in relation to female agency, creativity and consumerism, I suggest that these fashion films display the ideological contradiction of postfeminist media culture and show a tension between predictable narratives and political potential.

2. Prada as Benefactor

‘Women’s Tales’ can be seen in line with the cultural and economical strategy of the Prada Foundation, an organisation chaired by the designer Miuccia Prada and her husband Patrizio Bertelli, which over the past two decades has championed new artists, organised conferences and symposia, accumulated a large quantity of fine art and contributed to the restoration of old buildings and their change into art venues.⁴

¹ P. Díaz Soloaga, L. García Guerrero, “Fashion Films as a New Communication Format to Build Fashion Brands”, *Communication & Society*, 29, 2 (2016): 45-61 (46).

² E. Sneed, “Cannes 2012: Roman Polanski Screens his Prada ‘Therapy’ commercial”. *Pret-a-Reporter*, May 22, 2012. Accessed September 1, 2016. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/fashion/cannes-roman-polanski-prada-video-screens-327869>

³ Anderson is also the designer behind Bar Luce, the retro-inspired café at the Prada Foundation in Milan.

⁴ Since 1993 the Prada Foundation has presented art and architectural shows in their venues in Venice (Ca’ Corner della Regina) and Milan, and collaborated with several film festivals, promoting the rediscovery and restoration of film heritage. For example in 2004 it presented “Italian Kings of the Bs. The Secret History of Italian Cinema”, later featured at the Tate Modern in London. For more details

As well as reinforcing the distinct peculiarities of the Miu Miu brand (feminine, eccentric and cosmopolitan), these fashion films function also as an act of patronage in supporting new opportunities for female actors and filmmakers. 'Women's Tales', in fact, develop from the idea that the cinema industry, like the field of fashion, is a highly competitive battlefield characterised by gender imbalance and limited resources for emerging artists and female professionals. The launch of most of these shorts at the Venice Film Festival legitimises the cultural status of these works, provides an aura of prestige to the project but, at the same time, overshadows the product placement element of the initiative.

Nicky Ryan has considered Prada's sponsorship activities in the art sector and its dialogue with architects and designer for their epicentres, stores which also function as exhibition spaces.⁵ Ryan claims that, "Prada has constructed an artistic identity for itself through corporate mediation and careful patronage", especially following the Italian fashion boom of the 1980s and 1990s, when, with the increased homogeneity of luxury fashion houses, brands had to find their own path towards the creation of a unique identity.⁶ Prada's patronage activities functioned for Ryan as a mean of differentiation, a strategy of distinction through the appropriation of the artists' capital. 'Women's Tales' follows the brand's previous adventures into the art sector and places its festival-screened fashion films in a similar position to Prada's artworks exhibited at the Foundation's venues and Prada's garments showcased in their luxurious boutiques designed by starchitects⁷.

3. A genre at the interstices

'Women's Tales' could be seen as a valid patronage project and a successful online marketing tool, which emerged as traditional (print) advertising got more and more expensive on one side, and less effective due to less interest by consumers.⁸ The dual nature of this specific endeavour (artistic and commercial), but also of other similar projects, has stirred a reflection on this emerging phenomenon and specifically on defining and classifying the genre of 'digital fashion films'.⁹

about the history and mission see, <http://www.fondazioneprada.org/mission-en/?lang=en> Accessed September, 5, 2016.

⁵ N. Ryan, "Prada and the Art of Patronage" *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 1(2007): 7-23.

⁶ Ryan, "Prada and the Art of Patronage", 9.

⁷ Starchitect became a buzzword to define internationally renowned architects whose critical acclaim and public recognition transformed them into celebrities and cultural icons, among them Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano and Rem Koolhaas. Prada assigned the remodeling of its Los Angeles and New York City flagship stores to the latter and his firm, OMA. The Dutch architect collaborated also with the design of Prada Transformer, a portable pavilion exhibited in Seoul in 2009, and the recent restructuring of the industrial buildings in Milan where the Prada Foundation is now located.

⁸ Zenith Luxury Advertising Expenditure reports show that fashion houses are spending more in digital advertising, cutting back on their print ads, especially in newspapers, S. Halliday, "Digital fashion adspend on the rise as print suffers", *Fashion and Mash*, May 31, 2016. Accessed September, 5, 2016. <http://fashionandmash.com/2016/05/31/digital-fashion-adspend-rise-print-suffers/>

⁹ For a classification of the subgenres of the fashion film see also G. Needham, "The Digital Fashion Film", in *Fashion Cultures Revisited: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, 2nd edition, edited by S. Bruzzi and P. Church Gibson, London and New York: Routledge, 2013: 103-111. For Needham the fashion film represents "the marriage between fashion culture and information technology" (110) and its latest declination, the digital fashion film, covers a wide variety of online moving images: promotional videos for seasonal collections, behind-the-scene of catwalks and photo-shoots, electronic look-books and narrative or experimental shorts directed by visual artists or filmmakers. Focusing on the subgenre of the 'boutique film', videos created for a brand's e-store, Needham claims that the

Nikola Mijovic prefers using the term “*promotional fashion film* to denote principally the short films commissioned by fashion companies as part of their online branding and marketing”, thus stressing the commercial side of these works.¹⁰ Nathalie Khan, instead, considers them as a new media genre and in her analysis of narrative fashion films she shifts the focus to audiences, now regarded not simply as viewer-consumers of ads but more cinematic spectators, and argues that the fashion film aims “to break down boundaries between consumption and representation”.¹¹ Support and distribution cannot be the only valid criteria for the definition of the genre: fashion films, albeit being digitally shot and mostly available online, cannot simply be defined as new media. They are perhaps best interpreted as a hybrid genre, developing at the interstices of commerce and art and allowing the collision of fashion and cinematic tropes. More importantly they remediate previous attempts:¹² digital fashion films ought to be seen in a long archaeological continuum with the trick and féerie films of Méliès, the Serpentine dance featured in the films by the Lumière brothers and Edison Studios, actuality films of catwalks in the early twentieth century, industrial films promoting manufacturers, and I would add also music videos.¹³

Varying in length from three to ten minutes and also in content and style, the Miu Miu fashion films are rich in cinematic references and draw inspiration from genre films and classical narratives, but also from avant-garde works, and experimental styles. ‘Women’s Tales’ span from the Italian gothic horror of *The Woman Dress* (2012) by Giada Colagrande, to the surrealist animation of *De Djess* (2015) by Alice Rohrwacher and the poetic and minimalist Japanese atmospheres of *Seed* (2016) by Naomi Kawase. The project is unique in offering contradictory narratives, inherent to the films’ interstitial nature: in between branding strategy and artistic intervention. ‘Women’s Tales’ entangles both feminist and anti-feminist themes presenting female characters as role models living enviable and yet unattainable lifestyle. These fashion films originate from the idea of empowering liminal voices, supporting other women and obtaining more equal opportunities in the film industry, and yet the project promotes the notion that women’s paths to empowerment and pleasure is through consumerist practices: wearing Miu Miu luxury clothes and accessories.

4. Postfeminist texts

These contradictory ideologies situate ‘Women’s Tales’ within a postfeminist media landscape because it appropriates the cultural power of feminism and, at the same time, dismisses its radical critique.¹⁴ Rosalind Gill has explored in great depth the

fashion film compensates for the absence of trying on garments and becomes a “substitution for touch” (109).

¹⁰ N. Mijovic, “Narrative Form and the Rhetoric of Fashion in the Promotional Fashion Film”, *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 2: 2 (2013): 175-186 (176).

¹¹ N. Khan, “Cutting the Fashion Body: Why the Fashion Image is no Longer Still”, *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture* Vol. 16 No. 2 (2012): 235-250 (237).

¹² Here I am referring to the notion of “remediation” as developed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their book, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Boston: MIT Press, 1999.

¹³ For a chronicle of the evolution of the fashion film see Marketa Uhlirova, “100 Years of the Fashion Film: Frameworks and Histories”, *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2013): 137-58.

¹⁴ The tenets of postfeminism remain a subject of much discussion. By considering the Miu Miu’s project as part of postfeminist culture, I follow Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra’s understanding of postfeminism as “a more complex relationship between culture, politics, and feminism” than the surpassed second-wave of feminism, see their “Introduction” in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Y. Tasker and D. Negra, Durham: Duke University

highly debated notion of postfeminism, and conceives it as a “sensibility” that characterises gender representation in the media in the twenty-first century according to certain stable tropes: among them “femininity as a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment”.¹⁵

The twelfth contribution, *That One Day* (2016) by American Chrystal Moselle, embraces this sensibility, not only because it invokes the idea of girlhood and growing up female opposing gender stereotypes, but also because it shows adolescents who rely upon their relationship with one another. In this film, a teenage skater endures sexist comments and intimidation from other male skaters until she meets a female gang that share her same passion. Together they roam New York’s streets and clubs forming social bonds against loneliness, using Miu Miu garments as markers of their friendship. Similarly to Varda’s *Les 3 Boutons* (2015), wherein a teenager living in the countryside momentarily transforms into a modern Cinderella thanks to a magic pink gown and eventually goes back to her studies and simple routine, this short celebrates a girl’s journey of self-discovery, thus perfectly encapsulating the vision of the postfeminist woman as a process of never-ending experimentation. In fact, as Sarah Projansky illuminates, “the postfeminist woman is quintessentially adolescent not matter what her age” and girlhood functions therefore as the most representative form of femininity in postfeminist culture.¹⁶

Ava DuVernay’s *The Door* (2013) is perhaps the best at articulating these instances. Gill explains that the notion that women are autonomous agents and rely upon each other is central to postfeminist discourses.¹⁷ In this film, women arrive at the door of a friend after a relationship breakup; they console and help her in a period of transition. This is a celebration of the power of feminine bonds and life changing events, making clothing a symbol of renewal; each change of costume charts our heroine’s emergence from her nest of sadness. Eventually the protagonist, played by Gabrielle Union, removes her engagement ring and wears a pair of leather gloves stepping out of the door. DuVernay’s film imbues Miu Miu luxury clothes with transformative and healing powers, reworking the postfeminist ‘makeover paradigm’, and uncritically suggesting that perhaps it is the dress that makes the woman rather than the woman who makes the dress.

In the twelve shorts there is a strong sense borrowed from third-way feminism that women want to reclaim their femininity as part of their individuality: they want to enjoy the pleasure of fashion, luxury and romance. However, differently from other postfeminist media text, such as the TV series *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) where consumerist values are equally celebrated and criticised with irony, there is little desire for laughing at the fashion world.¹⁸ While Polanski’s *A*

Press, 2007: 1-26 (1). Cf. S. Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, New York: Routledge, 2004.

¹⁵ R. Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 10, n. 2 (2007): 147-166 (147). See also Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London: Sage, 2009.

¹⁶ S. Projansky, “Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism’s Daughters”, in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Y. Tasker and D. Negra, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007: 40-72 (45).

¹⁷ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility”, 153.

¹⁸ Consumption is a very important topic especially in *Sex and the City* where the count of fashion brands mentioned in the course of the series is endless. However, the treatment of the fashion and beauty industries is ambivalent since they are not only celebrated but also equally mocked, thus reflecting the inherent contradictions of postfeminism and more broadly the postmodern condition. It

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Therapy concluded with a tongue-in- tagline “Prada suits everyone”, here humorous contradiction or comic effect that could normalise postfeminist anxieties are absent.

Only Lucrecia Martel’s *Muta* (2012) attempts an enigmatic critique, a veiled reflection on contemporary beauty standards. In her work, slow cinema atmospheres and sci-fi elements are intertwined to expose through ‘muted irony’ the current world of ultra-thin models as the camera shadows a crew of mysterious women sailors who seem to communicate via blinking their long eyelashes and move in a similar way to stick insects.¹⁹ As noted by Deborah Martin, the Argentine filmmaker is complicit in the game by participating into the project and showcasing the elegant Miu Miu garments, but, at the same time, she exposes the constructed idea of femininity present in the fashion world by exaggerating the tallness and thinness of the models/actors and transforming them into monstrous animals.²⁰ *Women’s Tales* thus embraces postfeminist narratives and discourses; they celebrate girlhood and women as subjects of desire but mostly neutralise the critical aspects, complicitly reinforcing the idea of a new elite of women who find happiness in fetishised luxury commodities.

In this short article I have suggested that the digital fashion film, as an umbrella term, exists in a media archaeological continuum where the tension between industrial/commercial goals and artistic/creative ambitions continue to generate new synergies. As we start appreciating fashion films less as ads and more as art experiments and creative exercises, one could only hope that more critical and ironic self-reference attempts come to the foreground in order to challenge fashion’s paradigms.

suffices to think of how the topics of beauty surgery and waxing are discussed by the protagonists: both as a way to improve self-esteem and reach pleasure but also an acknowledgment of being victims of commodification. For an overview see Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, eds. *Reading Sex and the City*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

¹⁹ The title of the film is enigmatic for its multiple meanings. While in Spanish it means ‘gang, horde’, in Italian it could be translated as ‘mute, silent’, ‘shift, change’, but also ‘pack’ as a group of dogs and ‘molt’ as the shedding of fur in animals.

²⁰ D. Martin, *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016: 116-119.